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DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS, INR/NESA, DRL

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SUBJECT: Sri Lanka braces for tight, tense election

Refs: Colombo 567, and previous

(U) Classified by Ambassador Jeffrey J. Lunstead.  
Reasons 1.5 (b,d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: Sri Lankans are getting ready to go to the polls on April 2 to vote for a new Parliament. At this point, it still seems to be anyone's race to win: the Prime Minister's UNP appears to be making a late charge against the President's UPFA, but it is not clear which side has the overall edge heading into election day. Smaller parties, such as the pro-LTTE TNA and the JHU (which is fielding an all-monk candidate slate), are also in the mix. Given all of the variables, including the likelihood of election day and post-election violence, Sri Lankans are braced for a potentially turbulent period. END SUMMARY.

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Sri Lanka on the eve of April 2 election  
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2. (U) Sri Lankans are getting ready to go to the polls on Friday, April 2, to vote for a new Parliament. Over 5,600 candidates are contesting for the 225 parliamentary seats. (FYI. The parliamentary election is being held on its own. Presidential and local elections are held on a different schedule: the next presidential election is due to be held in late 2005 or 2006, for example.) Turnout is expected to be average for Sri Lanka, with around 75 percent of the roughly 12.9 million eligible voters going to the polls. Over 10,000 polling stations are being set up across the country, including some at sites set up in zones on the periphery of areas controlled by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). (Thousands of Tamils living in LTTE-controlled areas are expected to vote at these sites). Polls country-wide are open from 7:00 a.m. until 4:00 p.m.

3. (SBU) U.S. Mission teams informally observing the election are already fanning out to sites around the country in order to be in place by April 2. The teams, which are made up of FSOs and FSNs, will be present in the following districts: Anuradhapura, Colombo/Gampaha, Galle, Hambantota, Jaffna, Kandy, Matara, Nuwara Eliya, Ratnapura and Vavuniya. USAID Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) employees based in Trincomalee and Ampara will also be providing reports about the situation in the always volatile eastern region of the country. In the meantime, large teams of observers from the European Union, the Commonwealth, and Japan will also be monitoring the election, along with monitors affiliated with the People's Alliance for Free and Fair Elections (PAFFREL) and the Center for Monitoring Election Violence (CMEV). (The electoral activities of PAFFREL and CMEV, two local NGOs, are partially funded by USAID.)

4. (C) With respect to atmospherics, people are going about their business pretty much as usual throughout the country on April 1 (due to election regulations, all campaigning ceased on March 30). There is little sense of excitement. In general, Sri Lankans have never appeared to warm to this campaign, perhaps because they are on election overload (this is the country's fourth national election, parliamentary and presidential, in under five years). That is not to say they are apathetic: turnout, as mentioned above, is expected to roughly match that achieved during previous elections, and there is a fair degree of interest and concern about the election and its possibly divisive aftermath.

5. (SBU) In the meantime, while the overall amount of violence has been low this campaign compared to those in the immediate past (see Reftels), local monitors report that complaints have surged in the past week. CMEV, for example, says that it has received over 1,500 reports of violence this campaign and that over 400 of those reports came in the last week alone. (The total number

of campaign-related killings stands at five. All of them have been in the east, and four apparently involved the LTTE.) As has been the case during past elections, a national curfew is expected to be put in place several hours after the conclusion of voting on April 2. The curfew may be extended further into the weekend depending on the situation.

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A Close Race is Forecast  
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16. (C) At this point, it seems to be anyone's race to win. Most observers agree that President Kumaratunga's United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) had a fast start, but may have faded a bit in the home stretch. (The UPFA consists of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party, "SLFP," the radical Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, "JVP," and some smaller parties.) Juxtaposed against this is the view (based on polling and anecdotal information) that Prime Minister Wickremesinghe's United National Party (UNP) may have begun to pick up some traction late in the race after a very slow start to its campaign.

17. (C) Smaller parties are also in the mix. The pro-LTTE Tamil National Alliance (TNA) had been expected to do well in the election, perhaps by winning over 20 seats (up from 15 now). The TNA's momentum may have been hurt somewhat by the recent split in the LTTE between northern and eastern elements. (Note: Indeed, there are reports that most of the TNA's candidates in the east are now supporting rebel commander Karuna, while those in the north remain loyal to the main LTTE organization. The situation is quite tense: on March 30, one of the TNA candidates in the east was shot and killed, probably by the LTTE. In response, GSL security forces have reportedly stepped up their patrols in the east. End Note.) Another party that could play an important role in the post-election period is the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), which is running an all-Buddhist monk candidate slate (see Reftels). This party, which is new, appears set to pick up several seats in Parliament, with some observers estimating that it may take nine seats or more. Two other important parties are the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) and the tea estate Tamil Ceylon Worker's Congress (CWC). Both of these parties are backing the UNP. The SLMC has been engaged in a serious fight with Muslim parties that are backing the UPFA and it is uncertain how strong a showing it will make. The CWC appears set to do well.

18. (C) Overall, as previewed in Reftels, it would appear quite difficult for either the UPFA or the UNP to win a majority of seats in Parliament (i.e., 113 seats or more in the 225-seat body); Sri Lanka's complex proportional representation system makes a landslide victory very difficult. At this point, the two alternatives appear to be: the UPFA wins the most seats and, by picking up support from other parties or cross-overs, is able to form the next government; or, the UNP, joining with the TNA, is able to form the next government.

19. (SBU) One factor that makes this election very difficult to predict is the high number of voters who remain undecided, according to various polls that have been done in the pre-election period. (In some polls, about a quarter of the electorate is essentially undecided between the two parties -- see Reftels.) It is not clear where these voters will end up (or if they will vote at all), but the cumulative impact of their votes will almost certainly prove decisive as to which parties are the players in the post-election timeframe.

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COMMENT  
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10. (C) Election day does not usually go smoothly in Sri Lanka. In 2001, for example, at the orders of the President's office, the military effectively prevented thousands of Tamils living in LTTE-controlled areas from voting. That particular problem is not expected this time around. Violence will probably pick up on election day, however, and hiccups should be expected, including various snafus -- some minor, some possibly more serious -- at polling sites and counting centers. Widespread fraud of the sort that could prove decisive in the election, however, has not generally been a problem in Sri Lanka in the past (though there are sure to be plenty of allegations).

11. (C) The tabulation of votes takes considerable time in Sri Lanka, but by mid-day April 3 there should be some sense as to the general shape of the overall result. If it is a particularly close race, a clear

picture could be delayed for some time. There is also a tradition in Sri Lanka of voters defying expectations, which leads at times to surprising results. Based on past experience, post-election violence involving winners attacking the losers could also be a problem. All in all, in light of these and other variables, Sri Lanka is getting ready for a bumpy ride in the next several days and weeks. END COMMENT.

12. (U) Minimize considered.

LUNSTEAD